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Assessing the European Commitment on Defence - An Analysis of EU Efforts to Achieve Interoperability

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Assessing the European Commitment on Defence – An Analysis of EU Efforts to Achieve Interoperability

by

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Abstract

This paper attempts to answer the following research question: To what extent are EU institutions tailored towards improving interoperability in the armed forces of its member states? A qualitative single-case research method was used based on a document study and semi-structured interviews with European Defence Agency (EDA) personnel and Dutch Ministry of Defence (MoD) staff. Using Moore's (2013) Strategic Triangle as a framework, the analysis focuses on the legitimising environment, operational capacity and public value of EDA. The legitimising environment was found to be permissive but limited due to wide-ranging concerns from member states regarding centralising coordination of the development and procurement of systems at the EU level. This has constrained EDA's operational capacity so that they cannot oversee complex joint procurement projects, which are left to OCCAR, the NSPA or national procurement organisations. The public value related to interoperability generated by EDA is thus indirect and largely limited to coordinating the harmonisation of requirements for developing and procuring systems. Thus, a true shift to the EU coordinating the development and procurement of systems and contributing directly to interoperability and collective defence has not yet materialised. However, steps leading in that direction are slowly being taken. In order to increase interoperability more effectively, this paper recommends increasing collaborative spending on the development of systems, increasing EDA's involvement in requirement harmonisation, increasing EDA's operational capacity with a larger budget and staff, and allowing EDA to pitch defence cooperation opportunities with member states.

Key terms: EDA, EU, interoperability, procurement, defence

1. Table of Contents

2. Introduction	4
3. Theoretical Framework	8
3.1 Literature Review.....	8
3.2 Conceptual Model.....	15
4. Methodology.....	17
4.1 Design	17
4.2 Data Collection	17
4.3 Data Analysis.....	20
4.4 Reliability and Validity	22
5. Analysis.....	23
5.1 Empirical Findings for the Independent Variables	23
5.2 Empirical Findings for the Dependent Variable.....	34
5.3 Alignment and Answer to the Research Question.....	37
6. Reflection and Recommendations	38
6.1 Reflection on the answer to the RQ within the societal context.....	38
6.2 Reflection on the result in relation to the methodology and conceptual framework	38
6.3 Policy Recommendations	40
6.4 Recommendations for future research	41
7. Bibliography	42
8. Appendix	51

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2. Introduction

In December 1940, US President Roosevelt said America would help the United Kingdom fight Nazi Germany by selling them weapons. He proclaimed that the US would be the “great arsenal of democracy” in order to deny the Nazis control over Europe (Zeitiz, 2015). The US continued its military assistance of Europe during the Cold War by setting up NATO with the European powers. Through Article 5 of that Alliance, Europe has enjoyed an unprecedented era of peace on the continent (Stavridis, 2019). However, this era may have come to an abrupt end with Putin’s invasion of Ukraine. Meanwhile, US isolationism has taken hold in the US under Trump’s presidency (McTague & Nicholas, 2020). On February 11, 2024, Trump announced that he would encourage Russia to invade NATO members who were not paying at least 2% of their GDP on defence (Pengelly, 2024). European leaders were appalled as they worried that this undermined the US pledge to support the protection of NATO territory (Folkman, 2024).

In this security climate, European countries are rethinking their defence strategies. German Chancellor Olaf Scholz announced a *Zeitenwende* in German defence investment. European defence spending has been going up since Putin’s aggression in Ukraine started in 2014 (NATO, 2024). And especially since 2022’s escalation of the war in Ukraine, European nations have started investing in more defence industrial capacity (The Economist, 2023). Rheinmetall, for example, is opening new factories to produce munitions for Ukraine and stock up European arsenals (DW, 2024). However, European defence industrial production is fragmented, and each armed force uses different weapons systems that lack interoperability (Alvarez-Couceiro, 2024).

Interoperability

If European armies need to work together to deter Russian aggression, a difficult question rears its head: Does Europe need to build its own arsenal of democracy? If European leaders answer ‘yes’ to that question, problems with interoperability need to be solved. Problems with interoperability are transboundary, and the European Union seems an ideally positioned actor that could solve such problems because of its supranational nature. Thus, in order to help solve the interoperability puzzle, this paper will ask the following research question: *To what extent are EU institutions tailored towards improving interoperability in the armed forces of its member states?*

Interoperability is a broad concept that requires further explanation. NATO (2023) defines it as “the ability for Allies to act together coherently, effectively and efficiently to achieve

tactical, operational and strategic objectives”. Interoperability in the military can also refer to shared doctrine, terminology, training and information (NATO, 2023). Moon et al. (2008) further explore the definition by distinguishing between technical and organisational aspects of interoperability. They contend that interoperability between systems relies on technical, operational and logistic interoperability, while interoperability between organisations relies on human-activity elements such as behavioural, doctrinal, and cultural interoperability. US Marine Corps Colonel Russ (2011) suggests that to achieve interoperability as a joint force, it is necessary to refine doctrine, develop and employ combat systems that can communicate with each other, mandate more joint training, and improve the intellect of a joint warfighter. These different definitions of what is needed to achieve interoperability in a force show that the academic community uses the term ‘interoperability’ in a broad sense. Authors connect many different aspects of the armed forces to the term. This reveals that what is necessary to achieve interoperability throughout the EU requires defence organisations to focus on all the aspects mentioned above, but this article will not be able to cover all those aspects.

Using Russ’ definition of interoperability, this thesis will focus on EU doctrine and the production of systems. In an ideal situation, one country should be able to supply another with munitions and spare parts and even train the other’s soldiers because of the similarities in each other’s weapons systems. For example, this is what NATO has tried to do with European armies. NATO has standardised munition types, such as the 155-millimeter artillery shell, that each NATO member’s artillery unit should be able to use (Copp, 2023). While NATO’s efforts have been invaluable, there are still significant differences in the different militaries. For example, The US, UK, Germany, and Italy all use different main battle tanks and maintain different artillery systems and fighter aircraft. They might be able to use each other’s munitions with these systems, but the maintenance and procurement of these platforms are done entirely separately.

This is the case because defence industrial policy has historically been a national task within the EU (Alvarez-Couceiro, 2024). Each EU member state thus sources its arms from different places. This is why Germany has Leopard tanks from Rheinmetall, while Italy services the Ariete made by Oto Melara, and France uses the Leclerc made by Nexter (Borsari, 2023). The problem with countries buying from their own industrial weapons manufacturers is that European armed forces end up servicing completely different non-interoperable platforms. This has become a glaring problem as Russia invaded Ukraine because Ukraine’s logistics system now has to service hundreds of different platforms at the front that each need their own spare

parts and trained soldiers and mechanics that know how to service them (France 24, 2023). The European defence industry is thus fragmented, and continued nationally oriented acquisitions will extend the interoperability problems, thus leading to the aforementioned research question.

Societal and Academic Relevance

The question of interoperability is an aspect of cooperation that lies at the core of the geopolitical problem presented to the EU, with the Russian government threatening European peace and security. Getting an accurate image of the EU activities regarding interoperability is important because it grants policymakers a new perspective on EU cooperation. This paper also aims to give recommendations for policymakers on how to improve the effectiveness of this cooperation. If the EU can succeed in becoming an influential player in improving interoperability, the cooperation between member states' armed forces will be more effective, and the collective security of the Union will thus be improved. It is, therefore, clear that it is societally relevant to research this aspect of the EU.

Academically, this thesis hopes to add to the literature about EU policy on defence. Interoperability is an aspect of defence that has mostly been the domain of NATO, but as Europe is shifting its defence strategy, the role of the EU will become more critical as it can help solve such transboundary problems. Therefore, it is important that more research is done on the ability of European institutions to aid member states' armed forces with challenges such as interoperability. The fragmentation of the European defence industry is another topic about which has not been published much in academic circles. This study will take an organisational perspective in order to see how the EU and its institutions could catalyse cooperation between EU member states to work together on challenges that are primarily European in nature.

Mark Moore's (2013) strategic triangle could, in this sense, be used in this thesis to assess the potential of EU institutions regarding interoperability. The strategic triangle as a concept is chosen because it is helpful to identify the different factors influencing the EU's strategy regarding interoperability. Through EU institutions such as the European Defence Agency (EDA), programmes like the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and funds such as the European Defence Fund (EDF), the EU can become a body that is a catalyst for the strengthening of interoperability. Since the aforementioned fragmentation of the European defence industry constitutes a transboundary problem, a transboundary and multilateral actor like the European Union is perfectly placed to take up this challenge. However, the management of such a vast task cannot be understated, as each member state will protect its

own vested interests. The member states will thus need to allow the Union to coordinate this challenge and EU institutions need the organisational capacity and architecture to support member states' armed forces. Moore's strategic triangle can thus help to look at the operational feasibility, the political will, and the public value of an EU approach (Moore, 2013). However, since Moore (2013) only offers a broad strategic management model for public organisations, it needs to be tailored to address specific defence and security issues. The ambition of this study is, therefore, to build on Moore to arrive at a model for further doctrinal and industrial integration. This adapted model is presented in section 5.2 Using qualitative data, this article hopes to contribute new empirical evidence about these topics to the academic community. Other academics can use this data in further analyses of the EU, interoperability, the defence industry, and defence cooperation in Europe.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Literature Review

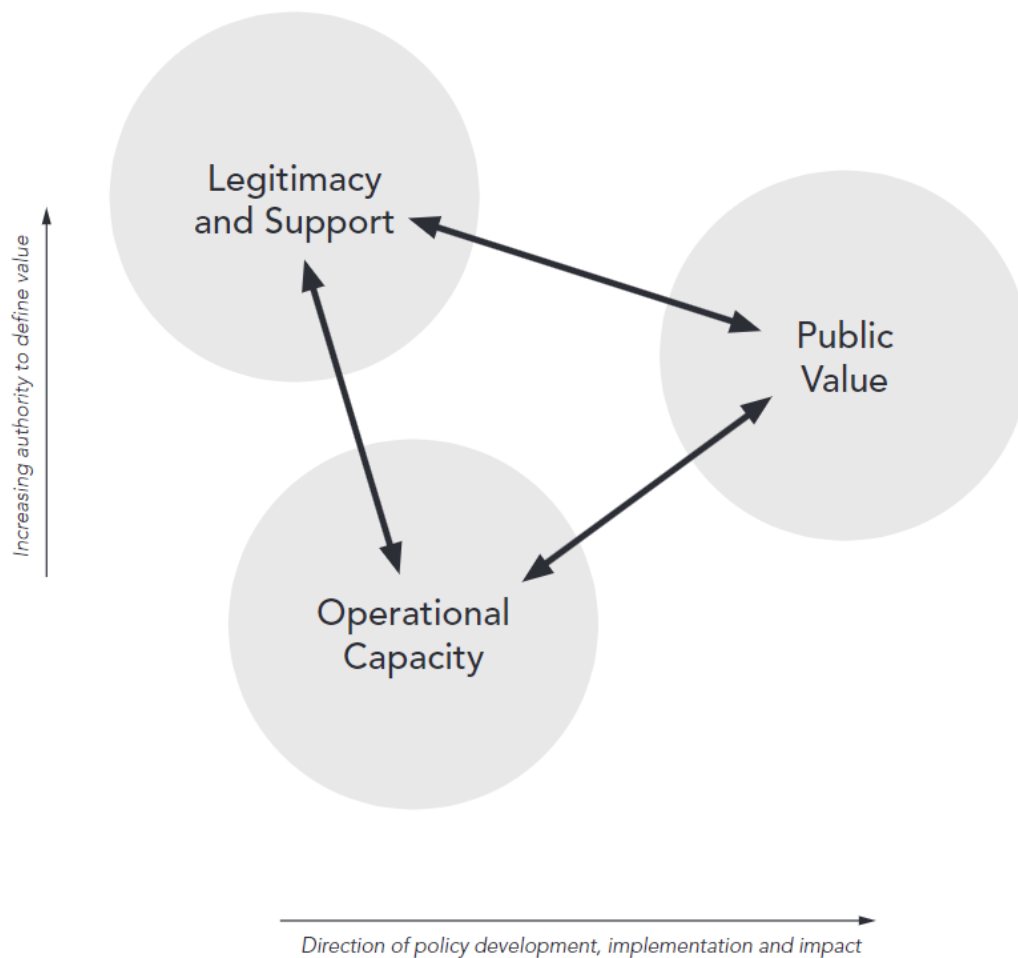
This chapter includes the literature review, followed by an explanation of the theory, the conceptual model and the main hypothesis. Regarding interoperability in European armies, NATO has played a leading role in setting standards. Through Standardisation Agreements (STANAG), NATO ensures that ammunition can be shared and weapons systems have some level of interoperability, as well as covering other forms of interoperability (NATO, n.d.-a). NATO has played a crucial role in ensuring that 32 armed forces are capable of fighting together. However, NATO is not equipped to address the fragmentation, duplication and waste of defence spending. Because the competency for the procurement of matériel lies with national governments as defence is still very much seen as a main task of the nation-state (Bergmann et al., 2021). However, seeing as the defence industry is also an economic sector, the European Union does have the competency to somewhat influence where and how its member states buy military hardware. The Union is primarily an economic bloc that retains many capabilities on that front, with the internal market as its foundation. In this capacity, Commissioner for the Internal Market Thierry Breton, has, for example, seriously influenced the debate to strengthen the so-called European Defence Technological Industrial Base (EDTIB) with his plea for a 100 billion European Defence Fund (Wax & Kayali, 2024). The Commission has also created a new Directorate-General for Defence Industry and Space (DEFIS) and presented the first-ever European Defence Industrial Strategy (EDIS) (European Commission n.d.). This Strategy is meant to increase collaboration in procurement and the total military acquisitions within the EU. Grand (2024) writes that 78% of European defence acquisitions currently come from outside the Union. Buying from third countries in such quantities ensures that interoperability remains hard to achieve.

In order to address challenges regarding military cooperation, the EU set up the European Security and Defence Policy in 1999, which was reformed into the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) in 2009. The CSDP is the main policy framework through which the Union can address military challenges such as interoperability (European Parliament, 2023). In 2016, the EU's High Representative, who heads the CSDP, presented the EU Global Strategy on Foreign and Security Policy (EUGS), in which it was argued that capabilities should be developed with maximum interoperability. The strategy also points to the fact that the member states were far away from reaching 35% of collaborative procurement, a benchmark that was set in 2007 and which was also not met in 2021, with member states only procuring 18% of

their matériel collaboratively (Borrell, 2024; EEAS, 2016; European Defence Agency, 2022b). The CSDP contains an agency that should be able to address this challenge, the European Defence Agency (EDA). This agency was set up in 2004 to support the development of defence capabilities and military cooperation among the member states. It is also supposed to strengthen the European defence industry (European Defence Agency, n.d.-b).

The literature review's evidence points to the assumption on which this thesis is based. Namely, the European Union, through its agency (EDA) and initiatives (PESCO, EDF, etc.) which are supported by EDA, can positively influence the degree of interoperability between EU armed forces. This is also where the Strategic Triangle (Figure 1) comes in, which can be applied to the aforementioned theory. Moore's (2013) Strategic Triangle is based on the premise that public managers use their assets to attain the maximum public value possible. To achieve that maximum public value, they require sources of legitimacy, support, and operational capacity. The triangle is based on a horizontal axis representing the flow of policy from development to implementation to impact. The further along the axis one goes, the more developed a policy is, and the more one can measure its impact. The vertical axis represents the degree of authority that is given to a definition of public value. This authority is given by politicians who share the opinion that a specific public value is worth pursuing. The environmental conditions thus need to be such that they enable the production of that public value. As can be seen in Figure 1, each point in the triangle influences the others. So, public value is not only dependent on the others but can also influence them. A public value account can increase operational capacity as it can give clear targets to aim for as well as performative feedback. Operational capacity requires legitimacy and support to function properly. Because without political backing, a bureaucratic organisation cannot exist. However, operational capacity can also generate legitimacy and support if a bureaucracy proves to be effective and efficient. Each point of the Strategic Triangle will be elaborated upon in the following sections.

Figure 1. The Strategic Triangle (Moore, 2013)



The public value of interoperability & EU defence cooperation

In order to evaluate the public value of interoperability and defence cooperation within the Union, one first needs to understand what public value is. In his book, Mark Moore (1997a) elaborates on this by explaining that, like the private sector creates value in terms of money for its shareholders, the public sector creates public value for the public. However, this public value is much more abstract than private value creation due to its all-encompassing meaning. The government, through its managers, creates value in terms of clean streets, educated citizens, the safety and security of the country, etc. However, Moore (1997b) explains that the creation of public value also incurs costs in the form of taxes. Money that could otherwise be spent on private consumption. Therefore, one could question whether each form of public value is worth pursuing. Another cost of the creation of public value is the compelling authority the state uses to make its citizens do things. This could be fining litterers to keep the street clean or prison

sentences for violent criminals to keep the street safe. Moore argues that public managers must be able to show that the public value created outweighs the cost of forgone private consumption and restricted liberties. It is then the job of politicians to sell to their voters that a public value is worth pursuing. Furthermore, Moore explains that the measurement of created value is best done by looking at past performance. In the private sector, companies do that by focusing on their bottom line and evaluating their quarterly profits. The public sector can emulate this by evaluating past policy programs instead of focusing on policy analysis that is guesswork about the future (Moore, 1997b).

If we apply the above to interoperability and defence cooperation, one has to assess the strengths and weaknesses to ascertain whether it is a public value worth pursuing. The strengths would seem obvious because, as has been established in the introduction, interoperability is necessary for allies to fight together. Deni (2014) illustrates this in his article, pointing out that maintaining operational and tactical interoperability is necessary for large-scale joint military operations. Especially if European states want to deter Russia, they have to show that they have credible deterrence and that they can fight like one army. Deterrence involves communicating to the adversary that their losses will outweigh the potential gains (Gartzke & Lindsay, 2019). interoperable European armies will certainly help in that regard. This reasoning shows that pursuing interoperability and defence cooperation is a way to safeguard the sovereignty of European nation-states, which is the benefit of interoperability as a public value.

Regarding the weaknesses, one could argue that increased defence cooperation will mean sacrificing parts of one's national defence industry for the defragmentation of the European defence industry. Ditrych and Kucera (2023) argue this in their article, explaining that the industry's economic interest, not the state's military security needs, pushes a government to prioritise domestic weapons procurement. Achieving more interoperability and defence cooperation thus may cost some domestic economic pursuits as governments will have to choose to buy weapons with their fellow EU member states. However, seeing as 78% of the arms acquisition investments currently flow to non-EU member states, redirecting that flow to other EU member states can also contribute to the European economy as a whole. Another potential cost is paid in terms of sovereignty. Currently, EU member states remain in control of their own defence procurement. However, with defence cooperation, more power will be transferred to the European level of decision-making. Some will perceive this as giving up sovereignty, but it can also be characterised as pooling sovereignty.

Legitimising environment for defence cooperation in the EU

The perception of defence cooperation as legitimate public value can be influenced by the legitimising environment. This environment is made up of national politicians who have the ability to acknowledge interoperability and defence cooperation as a public value worth pursuing. The fact that the Union comprises 27 nation-states that each have their own opinions about defence means that the legitimising environment varies per country. A discourse analysis of Irish and French opinions of the CSDP, for example, found that France has been pushing for more European defence cooperation and interoperability. The Irish, on the other hand, have a foreign policy that is based on neutrality, which may result in minimal participation in European defence projects (Rayroux, 2014). These differences per country can be classified as a weakness in the legitimacy of interoperability as a public value because EU defence cooperation would benefit from a consensus among EU politicians that it is important to pursue. However, Schilde et al. (2019) posit that EU defence policy has been very popular for decades, retaining support from 75% of the public. Their research shows that pooling and sharing defence burdens particularly resonates with the public. They further argue that slow progress with integration on defence is due to the elites more so than the public. This means that politicians should not have any trouble selling interoperability and defence cooperation to the public, which is a strength. The only ones that need to be convinced of this are the politicians themselves. But recent geopolitical developments such as Russia's war in Ukraine, Brexit and Donald Trump's anti-NATO rhetoric have made the legitimising environment on defence cooperation more permissive as they are all arguments for more EU defence policy (Schildt et al., 2019).

Since the war in Ukraine started in 2022, the EU has established many defence initiatives. As countries have given significant amounts of ammunition and matériel to Ukraine, they need to refill their warehouses (Besch, n.d.). There are even calls for the Union to shift to a war economy (European Council, 2024; Gray, 2024). It would thus seem that the current geopolitical situation is as legitimising as it can get for EU defence cooperation and interoperability. In the 2022 Strategic Compass, the EU Council committed to joint investments in next-generation capabilities on land, air and sea, as well as strategic enablers such as air-to-air refuelling and command & control (Council of the EU, 2022). The commitment from national leaders thus seems to be there. If the Council passes the recently unveiled EDIS, this will further lock in the commitment to more defence cooperation (European Commission, n.d.). However, nationalist and sovereigntist issues remain with political leaders who do not

always trust each other (Hartley, 2023). This will likely be a continued challenge for EU defence collaboration in the future.

Operational capacities of defence cooperation in the EU

The EDA heads a host of initiatives through which it attempts to accomplish this mission. Firstly, there is the EDF, which provides funding for PESCO projects and other projects. The fund was established in 2017, and Håkansson (2021) writes that it can be seen as one of the initiatives used by the Commission to gain more influence over the defence policy field (Martins & Mawdsley, 2021). The rationale the Commission used for the establishment was that the fragmentation and duplication of weapons systems in Europe was caused by insufficient cooperation (Camporini et al., 2017). In other words, the lack of collaboration in procurement negatively impacts the interoperability of European armies. The EDF is thus supposed to give a financial incentive for member states to work together with industry in procurement, as previous goals introduced by the Commission did not present enough of an incentive. The main requirement to gain funding from the EDF is that projects require at least three participating entities from three member states. This rule exists to ensure that they are not just Franco-German projects but rather projects involving broad partnerships to address the European lack of cooperation (Sabatino, 2022). Sabatino (2022) further writes in her article that the EDF constitutes a game-changer in European integration because it is the first time the EU uses large sums of money from its institutional budget for jointly produced defence products. This thus encompasses a new area of EU cooperation that should positively influence interoperability between member states and thus constitutes a strength for the EU's operational capacity.

Secondly, the EU launched the PESCO initiative in 2017, which serves as a legal framework under which member states jointly plan, develop and invest in military capability projects. PESCO projects are eligible for co-funding from the EDF, which serves as a financial incentive to participate in collaborative projects and strengthens the operational capacity (European Defence Agency, n.d.-c). PESCO currently has 68 projects in which member states can participate voluntarily. Billon-Galland and Efstathiou (2019) write about PESCO that it could result in the creation of economies of scale and interoperability. However, about the 34 projects that were active at the time, they point out that they are only a drop in the ocean when compared to NATO's requirements and EU ambitions, which points to a weakness in the operational capacity. In the Council of the EU's strategic review of PESCO from 2020, they acknowledged

that commitments up to that point were insufficient (Council of the EU, 2020). The EU Parliament goes further in-depth, adding that experts point to the nature of the projects, which only address low-end capabilities and are mostly what member states were already developing nationally (Lazarou & Laïci, 2020). The report also details criticism about the lack of clear purpose for PESCO projects. It is not centred on a core project, commitments are loosely implemented, and defence planning remains a national focus. The lack of ambitious projects combined with a lack of clear purpose for those projects are weaknesses for the operational capacity of PESCO.

However, there are a number of projects that are of interest from an interoperability point of view. For example, the Next Generation Medium Helicopter project, in which France, Italy, Finland, and Spain are participating. This would provide a replacement for the NH90, a transport helicopter currently in use by many armed forces (Defence Industry Europe, 2023). The Eurodrone project focusing on producing long-endurance drones, the European Patrol Corvette project, or the European Attack Helicopter TIGER project also offer opportunities that could increase interoperability if enough member states use those products. A caveat is that in these PESCO projects, inter-European competition is still normal. Italy did not join the TIGER project, perhaps because Leonardo is a competitor of Airbus, which leads that project. If the consequence is that the Italians choose another attack helicopter, they will be less interoperable with the countries opting for the TIGER (Anicetti, 2024). Furthermore, Murillo (2023) posits that only Spain, Italy, France and Germany, coined the 'PESCO 4', have the industrial capacity to design and produce large complex systems, while other countries can only produce components. The PESCO 4 have to act as system integrators, leading PESCO projects until other countries gain the ability to take that role. With the PESCO 4 taking a leading role, projects can be more ambitious. Furthermore, with each project it should become easier as countries learn to work together and obstacles to cooperation are taken away. However, this requires all member states to keep participating and prioritise collaborative procurement. The inter-European competition can thus be a weakness, while the leadership of the PESCO 4 can be a strength as long as they are committed and collaborate well.

Thirdly, there is the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD), which aims to provide an overview of the EU defence landscape and to facilitate cooperation with the identification of collaborative opportunities and was launched in 2017 (European Defence Agency, n.d.-a). The 2022 CARD report lays out the problems there are with collaborative investments in defence. It says that member states prefer national procurement because they view

collaboration as more time-consuming and too complex. They only consider collaborative procurement if national plans coincide with plans of other member states. Another factor is the nationally defined requirements, which follow from national military doctrines, of which each country has their own. After national requirements, NATO standards are prioritised, and only after that are EU priorities considered. Further obstacles to cooperation are the complexity of legislation, pressing deadlines, constrained budgets and retaining a good overview of EU defence initiatives. The CARD report further emphasises that member states should use the PESCO projects and the EDF for collaborative procurement (European Defence Agency, 2022a). Ilinca (2023) writes about CARD that the tool is still in its infancy but has the potential to improve cooperation in capability projects. He further explains that CARD can only evolve into a European defence analysis process if the member states adequately support it. Ilinca also argues that CARD is important to ensure coherence in the planning processes between the EU and NATO. As the EU becomes more of a player in the defence sector, there are worries that the Union is developing ambitions that overlap with NATO, which complicates the relationship (Droin, 2023). However, there are signs that the EU-NATO relationship is becoming better with NATO being invited to PESCO meetings (Biscop, 2018). CARD as an initiative thus strengthens the operational capacity of the EU on interoperability because it can identify the weaknesses of the defence cooperation and turn them into opportunities.

It is thus clear that the EU has many ongoing initiatives that could defragment the European defence industry. The EDF provides funding, PESCO the framework for projects, and CARD provides an overview of potential opportunities. These initiatives provide a strong basis for EU defence cooperation, but the insistence of national defence organisations to procure arms individually instead of collaboratively presents the main weakness. The academics cited in this literature review point out that these initiatives can only address the challenge of European interoperability if the member states lend their support and prioritise collaborative procurement. They have acknowledged this in the creation of the CSDP and the EUGS but national interests can prevent member states from increasing their participation.

3.2 Conceptual Model

In this study, the EU thus serves as the independent variable, while interoperability is the dependent variable, as it is influenced by EU efforts to improve that interoperability. Furthermore, there are potential factors that can influence the EU's effort to improve interoperability. The member states serve as a context variable because if they prioritise their national industries too much, the effort of the EU regarding cooperation in the defence industry

is nullified. The EU member states can also accelerate cooperation by supporting the EU's efforts.

Then, the question is how the model reacts if one applies it to the Strategic Triangle on which this thesis is based. One would equate the EU institutions (primarily EDA) functioning as the independent variable with operational capacity. The public value account, in this case, is the interoperability between EU armed forces. Finally, the legitimacy and support lent to interoperability as a public value and the EU as the operational capacity needs to come from representatives of the member states. This then leads us to the main hypothesis:

H1: The EU has the ability to improve interoperability, but only if a shift towards EU institutions as coordinating bodies is supported by the member states.

This hypothesis is chosen because the literature review shows that EU initiatives are in place to address interoperability as a public value, but they require a shift from national to EU coordination in order to be most effective. The operational capacity of EU institutions like EDA requires increased support from the member states to function properly. It also requires legitimacy that is given by member states through their political support in the Council. If the member states do not see interoperability as a public value worth pursuing, which could be the case if they see their domestic defence industrial base or other national interests as more important, it is unlikely the operational capacity of the EU institutions can pursue more efforts that increase interoperability. In the end, armed forces are nationally arranged, and procurement is as well.

4. Methodology

4.1 Design

This study uses a qualitative research design to analyse a single case. This is considered the optimal method to research the EU's efforts around interoperability. It allows the researcher to study the contents of earlier research and EU documentation and speak to policymakers involved with EU efforts. Preliminary research found a distinction between the political commitment of member states and the actions of member states regarding EU defence cooperation. The qualitative single-case method gives the researcher the ability to find the reasons behind this distinction. Bryman (2016b) puts it aptly, saying: "The social world must be interpreted from the perspective of the people being studied, rather than as though they were incapable of having their own reflections on the social world (Bryman, 2016a, p. 393)". Especially in the policymaking field, it is important to understand how the employees of organisations that profoundly affect their society reflect on their own organisation and its impact. The qualitative method lends the ability to understand policymakers' underlying motivations, how they view their policy field, and what dynamics they experience in that field.

The case is centred around the EU's European Defence Agency and how they interact with the Dutch Ministry of Defence with regard to interoperability. While Defence Ministries from other countries could have been chosen as well, the Dutch Ministry was chosen for practical reasons. Since the author is based in the Netherlands, interviewing personnel from the Dutch Ministry of Defence was deemed to be a more efficient and effective way to execute this study. While this gives the study a narrower Dutch perspective, the interviews with EDA personnel and the document study also grant an EU-wide perspective. Regarding the Defence Ministry, policymakers who work on EU defence cooperation focusing on collaborative procurement were chosen. For EDA, policymakers working on military capabilities and with PESCO were selected. These organisations have been chosen with the research question in mind. The Dutch Defence Ministry represents one of the member states that feels the impact of EU efforts on interoperability. EDA is the main agency that represents the EU's efforts to influence interoperability. The interaction between member states and the EU institutions is crucial to understand in order to answer the research question and is thus of great relevance.

4.2 Data Collection

Document Study

The document study plays a crucial role in the research process of this thesis. It is used as the foundation for the theoretical framework and provides the context necessary to set the research project's boundaries. A snowball strategy was used to accrue the literature needed for the analysis. Using search engines like Google Scholar and the Leiden University Catalogue, an initial search was carried out using keywords related to the EU defence industry, interoperability, EDA, and EU defence cooperation more generally. The academic literature found using these keywords often contained references to other academic works that were of interest to the researcher. They also often contained references to important EU documents and government reports.

The researcher attempted to gather as much recent literature as possible in order to gain a good understanding of the current dynamics of EU defence cooperation. Because of geopolitical changes, these dynamics change over time. The war in Ukraine, in particular, seems to have had a profound effect on EU defence cooperation, as can be seen in the preceding chapters. There was thus an effort by the researcher to find documentation for the analysis that originates from after the start of the war in 2022. Since then, there has already been a significant amount of academic research published on this very subject, and there have also been some important yearly reports from EU institutions like EDA since then. These resources have all been gathered and analysed for the purposes of this study. Of course, not all the gathered literature has been from this period of time, as it is also important to gain an idea of how EU defence cooperation has evolved before the war. Some academic works published before 2022 have also been included because they gave an important view of EU defence cooperation that could not be matched by more recent work. An example of this being the case is Cross's (2015) work, which identified the reasons behind the discrepancy between member states' political commitment and their real commitment to EU defence cooperation. The importance of its insight outweighed the fact that it is already almost ten years old.

Interviews

The respondents are all closely involved with defence cooperation and have intricate knowledge of the dynamics at play between member states and the particularities of defence procurement and capability development. The initial goal was to interview six respondents, with a division of three from the Dutch Ministry of Defence and three from the European Defence Agency. However, due to the practical difficulties of getting policymakers to make time for an interview in which they will touch on potentially politically sensitive topics, it was

only feasible to interview two EDA officials in the available time. Three respondents were interviewed individually, and two respondents from the MoD were interviewed at the same time for practical reasons. The respondents were approached using the LinkedIn Sales Navigator, which allows someone to search LinkedIn profiles on the basis of keywords and send messages. This proved to be a very useful tool because it allowed the researcher to specifically pick policymakers involved with EU defence cooperation.

Table 1: Interview & respondents overview

Respondent (R)	Occupation	Relevance to Research
R1	Sr. Policy Advisor EU Defence Cooperation at the Dutch Ministry of Defence	Knowledge of the Dutch participation in EDF and PESCO.
R2	Policy Officer at EDA	Years of experience working at the EDA, having intricate knowledge of the processes of PESCO.
R3	Project Officer for Capability Assessment at EDA	Intricate knowledge of EU capability development priorities.
R4 & R5 (same interview)	Policy advisors for EU cooperation at the Dutch Ministry of Defence's Command Material and IT (COMMIT)	Experience with the MoD's defence cooperation with other EU member states and EDA.

The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner, meaning that the interviewer asked prepared questions but could deviate from them at any time. This was done in order to explore potentially interesting topics that respondents were willing to talk about. The semi-structured method also allowed for extra questions to be asked in order to get more in-depth insights from respondents. The interviews were conducted in an online or offline setting, whatever was practical for the respondent, in order to get a higher response rate from potential respondents. It was also agreed that their identities remain anonymous and that interview transcripts were not publicised. The last measure is unfortunate for the transparency of the

research but inevitable because the topic is politically sensitive and touches on matters of national defence. It was attempted to record as many of the interviews as possible, but during two interviews, this was not allowed. Instead, the interviewer noted the respondent's answers during the interview. The interviews were transcribed and then coded using Atlas Ti.

4.3 Data Analysis

Each interview was transcribed, and the text was uploaded into Atlas Ti. This was then coded, based on the operationalisation table (table 2) using a deductive coding method. This method uses the content of the text to come up with fitting codes. Three code groups were established: Positive aspects of EU instruments, Potential constraints of EU instruments, and potential recommendations. The positive and negative aspects were coded to be used in the analysis in order to corroborate what was found in the document study. The potential recommendations were used in the reflection chapter to corroborate what was found in the document study regarding potential improvements that could be made within the EDA and surrounding EU defence cooperation in general.

The analysis was done by using the gathered academic literature and EU/government reports and corroborating their findings with what the respondents said in the interviews. The interviews thus served as a way to gain an extra perspective on top of what the existing literature provides. Moore's (2013) Strategic Triangle, with its three points: legitimising environment, operational capabilities, and public value, is used as the analysis structure. For the legitimising environment and the operational capabilities, constraints and positive aspects were found in the document analysis. These were concurrently corroborated by the findings from the coded transcripts. The analysis of the public value came last since the legitimising environment and operational capabilities have a profound effect on the public value the EU is able to create. As part of this analysis, the findings focused on whether a significant shift from individual member states to the EU level in the effort to improve interoperability.

Table 2. Operationalisation Table: This table visualises the variables, indicators, and sources studied in the analysis. The variables are based on Moore's (2013) Strategic Triangle. Each indicator measures a different aspect of the variables. For example, the 'Political and actual commitment...' indicator measures the legitimising environment by studying member states' political statements and analysing their actual commitment by looking at internal communication. The 'Alignment Strategic Management' row visualises the effect L.E. and O.C. have on P.V., which is elaborated upon in section 4.3

Variable	Indicator	Explanation	Source
Legitimising Environment (L.E.)	Political position and actual commitment of bigger/smaller member states toward strengthening EU institutions	studies political statements and internal position documentation to measure L.E.	Official Documentation, academic research, interviews
	The presence and role of similar organisations in the field	studies the commitment to similar organisations to measure EDA's L.E.	Official documentation, academic research, interviews
	The Council position on strengthening EU institutions	Utilises Council positional statements to gauge L.E.	Official documentation
Operational Capacity (O.C.)	EDA's current tasks and supported projects	Utilises current tasks and projects to measure EDA O.C.	Official documentation, academic research, interviews
	EDA involvement in EU initiatives such as CARD, PESCO, EDF	Studies degree to which EDA is involved in other EU initiatives to measure O.C.	Official documentation, academic research, interviews
	EDA's staff size	Studies size of EDA staff gauge O.C.	Official documentation, academic research
Public Value (P.V.)	Current supported projects that increase industrial capacity for operational needs	Utilises the supported projects to measure the amount of generated P.V.	Official documentation, academic research, interviews
	EDA involvement in different capability development stages	Studies EDA activity in early vs. late stages of capability development to gauge amount of generated P.V.	Official documentation, academic research, interviews
	Prioritisation of EU strategic shortfalls	Studies whether EU shortfalls are addressed by member states to gauge EDA's generated P.V.	Official documentation, academic research
Alignment Strategic Management	Degree to which the L.E., O.C., and P.V. variables align with each other	This indicator measures to what degree the strategic management is aligned by studying the effects of L.E. and O.C. on P.V.	Result of document study and interviews

4.4 Reliability and Validity

This study has attempted to ensure the reliability and validity of the findings by taking measures that will be outlined below. Regarding reliability, meaning the repeatability of the study, which is inherently difficult to accomplish with qualitative research, the transparency regarding the method of respondent selection and document selection ensures that this study is as replicable as possible. The inability to publish the transcripts from the interviews is an unfortunate inevitability that somewhat decreases the external reliability.

The validity of the findings can be broken down into internal and external validity. The internal validity refers to causality and whether x really does cause y. In this study, it is clear that EU institutions have an effect on interoperability. It is harder to determine to what degree the EU's institutions achieve that effect. However, by using triangulation, the internal validity of the findings is safeguarded. This triangulation is achieved using the combination of document study and interviews. The document study is based on many different academic authors and different government and EU reports. Furthermore, the interviews were conducted with multiple respondents from member state governments and the EU. Instead of interviewing policymakers from just one organisation, interviewing employees from different organisations also ensures that the sources remain diverse. The many different sources used in this study ensure that the internal validity is intact (Bryman, 2016a).

Finally, external validity, which means the generalisability of the findings, was ensured by taking an EU-wide perspective. Instead of only interviewing Dutch policymakers, EDA staff were also interviewed to ensure that the findings were generalisable to the whole EU context. The EDA staff interviewed also elaborated in-depth on how other member states behaved regarding EU defence cooperation, and Dutch policymakers were also asked questions with an EU-wide context in mind. Furthermore, the document study was also done with an EU-wide perspective in mind. The wide variety of sources is also beneficial for external validity as they take many different perspectives into account (Bryman, 2016a).

5. Analysis

In this chapter, the findings of the document study and interviews will be presented, and their implications will be laid out. It should be pointed out that in order to protect the identity of the interviewed persons, the citations of direct quotes will not refer to the specific respondent who said it. The analysis will be presented using Moore's Strategic Triangle. In section 4.1, the legitimising environment and, subsequently, the operational capacities are explored. First, the analysis will go into the legitimising environment, detailing how permissive the political environment is for EDA. In the document study and during the interviews, the obstacles to participation in EU projects were explored. During the analysis of these interviews, the political environment was found to be somewhat permissive but limiting. Commitment from member states is found to be constrained by issues regarding trust, national sovereignty, state size, and potentially competing organisations.

Secondly, the analysis goes into the operational capacities of EDA, exploring the original mandate of EDA and how it does not fulfil this mandate, largely staying out of the realm of procurement. While it proved its ability to coordinate procurement during the 'Collaborative Procurement of Ammunition' project recently, the organisation remains too small in staff to undertake such procurement ventures on a regular basis. As such, the legitimising environment is connected to the operational capacities of EDA, as a more permissive environment would unlock the resources needed for EDA to take on extra responsibilities.

Thirdly, in section 4.2, the analysis explains the findings for the public value of interoperability and how the legitimising environment and operational capacities influence that dependent variable. It becomes clear that EDA is in a tough position to maximise its public value output due to a limiting legitimising environment and constrained operational capacities. Finally, these findings answer the research question in section 4.3, where it has become clear that the legitimising environment and the operational capacities limit EDA's effect on interoperability but that it still has some effect through its current activities.

5.1 Empirical Findings for the Independent Variables

Legitimising Environment

In principle, collaboration in the development and procurement of capabilities enjoys broad support among EU member states, as one can read in the 2022 Strategic Compass (Council of the EU, 2022). This has also become clear from the interviews done and the academic literature on the subject. Dutch Defence Ministry employees indicated in the interviews that the EDF and

PESCO are high-priority initiatives for the Ministry to participate in (interview R1, 2024; interview R4 & R5, 2024). An MoD respondent explained that:

“The Netherlands wants to be at the forefront of defence cooperation” (interview, May 2024, translated by author).

This statement suggests that this is indeed the case. Cross (2015) aptly points out that there are many statements from the member states that argue for the necessity of collaboration in order to secure the survival of Europe. French President Macron has even stated that “Europe can die” if member states do not prioritise EU defence investments (Caulcutt, 2024). But even though the political rhetoric supporting European Defence collaboration is presented in public, the political will to truly commit to collaborative development has left much to be desired. Because, as mentioned before, only 18% of defence investment is done collaboratively (Borrell, 2024). An interview respondent from EDA explained that:

“Politically, it [defence cooperation] is very much supported ... when it comes to reality, the situation is a little bit different ... if you look at the overall numbers of, let’s say, armaments, what is invested into the armed forces and what is channelled through collaboration at the EU level for PESCO, it’s a limited number in that sense” (interview, April 2024).

This statement reflects the discrepancy between the political commitment and the budgetary reality. To get a better view of that discrepancy one can study the three largest member states with the biggest defence companies that have a substantial influence on the EDTIB, which are France, Germany, and Italy (SIPRI, 2022). They each have a distinct perspective on increasing the EU’s power with regard to defence. Firstly, France has consistently committed to European collective defence because of President Macron. He came up with the idea of strategic autonomy already in 2017 and strived for Europe to be less dependent on the US for its defence. This line of reasoning is consistent with French strategic culture, which has always strived to keep out of the US sphere of influence (Dempsey, 2024). In its strategic review is mentioned that “The central role of the European Defence Agency (EDA) must be reaffirmed and all existing mechanisms put to use: the European Defence Fund (EDF), the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD), Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and the Hub for European Defence Innovation (HEDI) (Secretariat-General for National Defence and Security, 2022, p. 43)”. It is thus likely that Paris will support an increase in EDA’s capacities as they see the public value the organisation can produce and deem the investment worthy enough.

Secondly, Germany's opinion on an EU that is more focused on defence is harder to read. Puglierin writes that "the potential of the EU initiatives is seen as rather limited in Berlin and that the German government is reluctant to invest much energy or resources to advance them. A NATO-first approach, a missing European link of Germany's *Zeitenwende*, the reluctance to give up sovereignty and control as well as growing financial constraints all prevent Berlin from seeing the full potential of the EU as an "enabler" of an increased European defence capability (Puglierin, 2024, p. 1)". Germany is thus not as enthusiastic about a more powerful EU on defence as France perhaps is. In a recent Franco-German statement, they agreed that "The European Union must become a true geopolitical actor and security provider, able to respond to today's security challenges and strengthen the international order (Élysée, 2024)." However, the statement does not detail how exactly this should be done. It appears that the German government currently does not think the public value that the EU could generate for collective defence is worth the expense. Germany is thus unlikely to be a driver of more EDA capacities.

Thirdly, Italy, which is also a major player in the EDTIB, appears cautious about more power concentrated at the EU level. More specifically, they are concerned about the "growing role of the European Commission, and deep-rooted concerns about the French activism at EU level (Marrone, 2023, p. 1)". They seem to be more focused on NATO for defence and the Meloni government has not spent much political capital on EU initiatives (Marrone, 2023). On the other hand, Italy's foreign minister recently said that an EU army would be needed for peacekeeping, monitoring and deterrence (Decode39, 2024). This signals that at least not everyone in the Italian cabinet is against more power at the EU level per se, and Italy could perhaps be persuaded to give EDA extra capacity.

While Italy and Germany harbour reservations about more coordination on defence at the EU level, they have signed the 2022 Strategic Compass, in which they have committed to more collaboration on the EU level. However, Cross (2015) identified 'foot-dragging' as member states are reluctant to engage in actions they have rhetorically committed to. According to Cross (2015), there are many reasons for the reluctance to centralise procurement and development at the EU level. Germany did not want to militarise European defence excessively and feared French dominance, which led to them not participating in major defence collaboration opportunities. France, on the other hand, preferred pursuing bilateral agreements stemming from a sovereignty argument that its national defence industry needs to remain competitive in order to maintain strategic independence. Interview respondents confirm that French industrial

interests weigh heavily into their defence cooperation posture, with an EDA respondent saying that:

“There are countries which have defence industry like France, Germany, and they, of course, have vested interest not only from the armaments perspective, but also from industrial perspective” (interview, April 2024). And that: *“the French mostly want to produce and procure matériel within Europe. This is also good for their defence industry”* (interview, April 2024)

Spain, meanwhile, postponed joining EDA’s code of conduct on the defence equipment market, stemming from fears that ‘core’ member states were trying to shape EDA too much (Cross, 2015). Furthermore, Italy wanted to keep particular national defence technology sectors protected from Europeanisation and justified this by arguing that its national identity, exports, and return on investment would suffer if those areas were Europeanised. Cross found these justifications for ‘foot-dragging’ in national reports but not in reports with which EDA interacts. This shows that member states publicly want to be seen as committed but nationally have somewhat hidden motives for reluctant engagement with EU norms (Cross, 2015). This phenomenon is problematic for the legitimising environment because it means member states each have their own differing reasons, which keeps them from fully committing to European collaboration. This lowers the willingness to increase the operational capacity of EDA, which, in turn, reduces the public value that the Agency can produce. However, Cross (2015) also acknowledges that member states apparently feel that EDA has power over them as they try to keep these motivations hidden. She argues that this is advantageous for the agency in achieving shared defence norms.

The lack of commitment that European defence collaboration chronically suffers from can thus be characterised as stemming from nationalism and trust issues (Hartley, 2023). Regarding nationalism, member states want to be in control of their defence expenditure, and they want to procure equipment that fits their national needs. They would also like to invest defence expenditure in their own markets and to keep their technological advantage in certain sectors over other member states. Regarding the trust issues, member states are seemingly worried that others gain too much power over EDA and that other member states get more out of a project than they do. Hartley (2023) also writes that states have incentives to free ride and shift costs to the larger member states. However, with the introduction of PESCO in 2017, the EU has

implemented a set of 20 binding commitments that prevent at least some free riding as member states have to meet deadlines and submit reports of their progress (Rutigliano, 2023).

The member states each have their own reason for this lack of commitment, as can be seen in the justifications given above. As the member states are a heterogeneous group, it remains difficult for EDA to cater to each member state's wishes. Member states can be grouped in different ways according to different characteristics. One characteristic that has profoundly affected member states' participation in PESCO projects is size. In the conducted interviews and analysed documents, it is indicated that small member states are often less inclined to partake in projects, which Figure 2 shows (Eilertsen, 2020). A respondent who worked at EDA mentioned that:

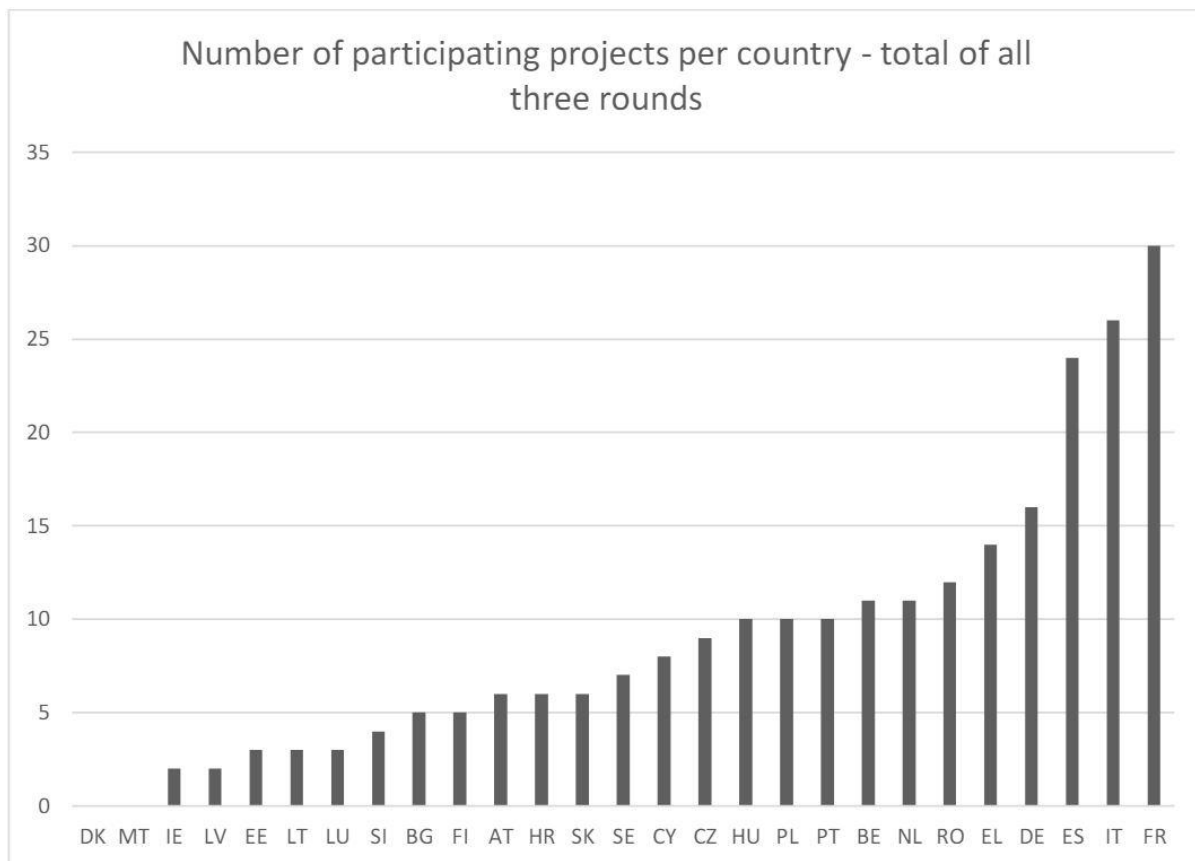
“smaller member states are more inclined to procure off-the-shelf equipment. So they do not want to engage in these very big and complex programs” (interview, April 2024).

Those countries find funding the development of new European weapons too expensive. Another reason for the reluctance to participate is the administrative burden, as the implementation procedures are highly bureaucratic (Gawron-Tabor & Willa, 2023). A respondent explained that:

“Taking measures to simplify the process, to take some of the administrative burden away from member states. That would help a lot in the cooperation” (interview, April 2024, translated by author).

Small countries with fewer civil servants may also see this as a reason not to partake. On the other hand, large countries like France and Germany have substantial defence industries that often take the lead in PESCO projects, which is a good incentive to participate in projects. It was also found that member states with more powerful capabilities participate in more PESCO projects in order to develop those capabilities further (Eilertsen, 2020). This means that large member states have a much greater ability and willingness to participate in projects, leaving small members behind in defence collaboration and capabilities development.

Figure 2: Commitment to PESCO in terms of number of participating projects, total across rounds 1-3. Note: The Members of PESCO have launched three rounds of projects: In March 2018; November 2018, and November 2019. (Eilertsen, 2020, p. 49)



However, in the interviews conducted, a respondent from EDA and the MoD also indicated that there are sufficient measures in place to ensure participation from smaller member states and smaller industries—for example, with the Integrated Unmanned Ground Systems (UGS) project led by Estonia (interview R4 & R5, 2024). An MoD respondent explained that:

“Smaller companies are also attracted due to measures in the EDF that stimulate the participation of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs)” (interview, May 2024, translated by author).

The EDA respondent indicated that letting small countries take the lead at times is a good way to ensure that projects do not only flow to larger member states:

“ ... there were some projects on the unmanned systems, which were led by smaller member states ... And there was a sort of backlash ... But then it's always decided that there are some sort of incentives from the Commission side for all to include smaller countries, industries, SMEs ... And that's how, for the moment, it really works, I think.” (interview, April 2024).

They also indicated that letting small countries take the lead does not result in the reluctance of bigger defence corporations to participate because, in the end, they want to make money. Participating in as many projects as possible is the best way to achieve that.

Another constraint to the political commitment to EDA as the main interlocutor for the joint development and procurement of arms is the presence of organisations that could be seen as potentially competing for political commitment. OCCAR and the NATO Support and Procurement Agency (NSPA) are both mentioned by respondents in interviews as organisations that defence organisations go to for joint procurement instead of EDA, because those organisations are better suited for those tasks (interview R1, 2024; interview R2, 2024; interview R3, 2024; interview R4 & R5, 2024). Competition between international organisations is something that can occur when organisations have overlapping tasks and compete for the same scarce resources (Brosig, 2011). With EDA and OCCAR gaining overlap in joint procurement and the EU and NATO becoming more overlapping in defence cooperation, some type of competition for resources between the organisations could arise. An EDA respondent explained that:

“[member states] are going to OCCAR if it's like big collaborative, because we have quite a few programs in OCCAR. Yeah, some of them are also done through the NATO agency, NSPA.” (interview, April 2024).

The NSPA has a long history of supporting NATO members with the purchase of weapons systems, with its precursor organisation being established in 1958 (NSPA, n.d.). In 2015, the NSPA's competencies were expanded to all aspects of systems procurement, from acquisition to sustainment (Heuninckx, 2016). It is a large organisation with roughly 1500 employees (NATO, n.d. -b). NATO has also been the bedrock for European defence cooperation since the end of the Second World War. The organisation started the harmonisation of European armed forces to make them interoperable. It thus makes sense that NATO and its NSPA have a significant role to play in joint arms procurement. However, the organisation's presence also means there has to be a sensible division of roles between the NSPA and EDA to avoid too much competition. Up until this point, NATO has been managing standardisation and logistics while EDA focused on other residual tasks. However, there are worries that the EU is more and more encroaching on NATO's tasks. Cooperation between NATO and the EU has proven difficult due to conflicts between member states. In order to ensure good cooperation between

the organisations it would be necessary to institutionalise the relations, but there are no formal agreements between the NSPA and EDA at the moment (Droin , 2023).

Founded in 1998 by France, Germany, Italy, and the UK, OCCAR has become an important joint procurement organisation in Europe. Belgium and Spain also joined the organisation, and non-members are allowed to participate in the projects. This, combined with the fact that the European states with the largest defence industries are members, has resulted in an organisation that manages many large defence projects. In interviews, EDA and Defence Ministry employees confirmed that member states go to OCCAR for their complex joint procurement projects (interview R1, 2024; interview R2, 2024; interview R3, 2024; interview R4 & R5, 2024). An EDA respondent explained OCCAR's role quite well, saying that:

“the most prominent one [procurement entity] is OCCAR ... it's kind of a legacy entity which are doing big programs” (interview, April 2024).

Some examples of their programmes are the Airbus A400M Atlas transport aircraft, the Boxer armoured vehicle, and the FREMM frigates (Heuninckx, 2016). Though it is a European intergovernmental agency, it is not an EU institution. It does have an Administrative Arrangement with EDA, which stipulates how EDA can transfer its projects to OCCAR for the later phases in capabilities development, such as procurement. In this collaboration, EDA focuses on drawing up the requirements and doing research on a new capability (Zandee, 2017). Zandee argues that merging the two organisations would make more sense in the long term, enabling the development of new capabilities entirely within a single organisation. However, the fact that the UK is no longer a member of the EU and that Turkey participates in OCCAR projects complicates such a merger.

Thus, the legitimising environment of EDA can be characterised as being somewhat permissive but limited. EU member states largely want to work together on defence but are still struggling to implement that wish. This struggle is caused by the factors that have been explained above. Though the member states know that they have to work together in order to achieve collective defence, trust issues hamper their ability to cooperate. National sovereignty is connected to those trust issues as each nation wants to retain control over its national defence and its defence industry. Then, there are other factors, such as size, that determine how much interest a member state has in developing capabilities collaboratively. Large countries see it as a boon for their industry, but small countries with small budgets see less of an incentive when they can just buy capabilities cheaply and immediately off the shelf. Finally, there are other players in capability

procurement, like OCCAR and the NSPA, that have a similar function as EDA, fragmenting the collaborative procurement tracks between these organisations.

Therefore, a true shift towards EU institutions from the member states in the military development and procurement sector has yet to materialise. In the interviews, respondents were sceptical about the EU becoming the main coordinator of defence procurement, arguing that member states will always hold the initiative and that collaboration without the EU will remain (interview R1, 2024; interview R2, 2024). A respondent explained that:

“the member states will always remain the primary procuring actors. However, that does not mean there cannot be a growing role for the EU” (interview, April 2024, translated by author).

Signs of a slowly growing role for the EU in the coming years are present. The 2022 Strategic Compass has called for more common investment and fully using PESCO and the EDF by 2030 (Council of the EU, 2022). More recent activities at the Council also signal that the member states are following through with this ambition. On May 28th, the Council added new tasks to EDA’s mandate, allowing it to aggregate demand towards joint procurement (European Defence Agency, 2024). However, it remains to be seen whether EDA will be able to handle this task with its limited resources, which will be detailed in the next section.

Operational Capacities

EDA, constituted in 2004, was created as an organisation that could oversee the entire military matériel chain from demand to supply. Using a capability-driven approach, the organisation would coordinate projects in close cooperation with industry. However, as has become clear during the interviews, respondents from EDA and the Ministry of Defence indicated that EDA does not have the capacity to fulfil this ambition (interview R2, 2024; interview R3, 2024; interview R4 & R5, 2024). For example, a respondent said:

“In general, the procurement capacity at EDA is pretty small. I mean, there is a capacity, and we are doing some procurement, but EDA is not a procurement agency. So, the procurement is quite limited” (interview, April 2024).

The respondents point to the fact that EDA mostly focuses on the early stages of developing new capabilities. The later procurement stage is done either by member states themselves or through OCCAR and the NSPA (R2, interview, 2024).

Zandee (2019) writes that EDA went for ‘low-hanging fruit’, such as organising training programmes, pooling acquisitions, and launching portals and tools for member states. He argues that the number of large equipment procurement projects initiated by EDA is very small (European Defence Agency, 2019). EDA was only involved with the pooled acquisition of Multi Role Tanker Transport (MRTT) Aircraft and the Medium Altitude Long Endurance Remotely Piloted Aircraft System (MALE RPAS). Another example of EDA’s limited capacity was given by a respondent regarding the European Patrol Corvette (EPC) (interview R2, 2024). This is a very sizable project that can have a significant impact on interoperability because there are currently 29 different types of destroyers and frigates in Europe, compared to four in the US (Calcagno et al., 2022). The project aims to replace ageing corvettes for the Italian, French, Spanish, Greek and Norwegian navies (Naval Group, 2023). It is funded with a €60 million grant from the EDF and €27 million by the member states. The project was initiated within the PESCO framework, and EDA helped draw up the new corvette requirements (European Defence Agency, 2023b). That initial phase is where EDA’s involvement largely ceased. The development of the corvette design is being coordinated by OCCAR, which has been designated by the European Commission as the Granting and Contracting Authority (Naval Group, 2023). The EDA respondent pointed out that:

“it's a new class of ships being built. So what we basically did at the Agency was, we helped to work on the requirements. And then when it comes to real building the ships, because it's a huge [project]. We need to hire basically a whole directorate” (interview, 2024).

That is why OCCAR, or a national procurement organisation, usually handles the phase after agreeing on the requirements of a new capability.

However, when the EU member states want EDA to procure equipment, they have the ability to do so. After the Armed Forces of Ukraine (AFU) became locked in a war of attrition, their need for 155-millimeter calibre artillery shells skyrocketed. In March 2023, the EU promised to provide the AFU with 1 million artillery shells within a year. On 20 March, the Council agreed on the project, and EDA swiftly set to work on the ‘Collaborative Procurement of Ammunition’. On the same day, EDA had 18 member states signed up for the project. As part of this project, a two-year track was set up to quickly aggregate demand to procure artillery shells, which would simplify the tendering process. The procuring member states would then be reimbursed by the European Peace Facility. The project also provided a seven-year

framework to collaboratively procure ammunition of various calibres meant for the replenishment of national stocks. This is one of the first procurement projects in which EDA had a central role (Caranta, 2023). An EDA respondent mentioned that around 70 contracts for artillery shells were signed (interview R3, 2024). This is a very significant amount, and according to the respondent, the effort was huge. However, another respondent also pointed out that this project reached the limits of EDA's capacity in procurement (Interview R2, 2024; Bergmann, 2024). An EDA respondent explained that:

“EDA did this ammunition procurement. And that was basically a very significant and substantial task for the agency, which was even a little bit too much” (interview, 2024).

One can learn from this example that member states can ask EDA to play a role in procurement, with Caranta (2023) arguing that this initiative could be the beginning of procurement centralisation at the EU level. However, the agency would certainly need more staff in order to carry out such a task effectively.

EDA grapples with a significant shortage of human resources compared to the ambition that was once laid out. The agency is relatively small, with only 171 employees at its disposal at the end of 2022 (European Defence Agency, 2023a). In the 2022 audit, the European Court of Auditors, which audits 43 EU agencies, it can be observed that there were 27 agencies with more than 171 employees (European Court of Auditors., 2023, p. 22). The largest agencies, such as Frontex, EUIPO, and Europol, employ over 1,000 staff members. EDA is also small compared to the other intergovernmental actors in the defence procurement realm. OCCAR employs more than 400 staff members, and NATO's NSPA employs around 1,550 people (NATO, n.d.-b; OCCAR, 2024). Then there are the national procurement agencies that are usually and logically bigger than EDA since they are the primary bodies in charge of equipment for their national defence. The French procurement agency, DGA, for example, employs over 10,000 people (Evidian, n.d.; Jürgen Hensel, 2021). Thus, one can conclude that EDA is relatively understaffed compared to other organisations in the field taking into account the original aspirations envisioned for the organisations (Quencez, 2017).

In total, EDA supported 94 projects in capability development, training, joint procurement, research and technology, and innovation. This is a sizable number of projects to be managed by an agency with only 171 employees. Of those projects, only nine were done in the PESCO framework, and only five were initiated through the EDF (European Defence Agency, 2023b). PESCO itself was implementing 68 projects in 2023, most of which were thus unsupported by

EDA. The President of the European Council, Charles Michel, has already called for this number to go up. He also called for EDA to become a more powerful European defence department, even saying that resources need to be provided to enable it to become a leader in joint procurement and financing (European Council, 2023).

Thus, while the operational capacities of EDA are currently quite limited, the future may see an increasing budget and staff, which will be needed to fulfil their newest core task of aggregating demand towards joint procurement (European Defence Agency, 2024). The addition of new responsibilities for EDA is a development that occurred in the final stages of this study, but it is important to acknowledge. It is a sign that more coordination in the military development and procurement sector will be done by the EU. However, the same Long-Term Review (LTR) in which this task was added acknowledges the strained capacity of EDA. It explains that EDA retains limited capacity for engineering activities involving development, testing and certification. Therefore, it goes on to argue that EDA should restrict its joint procurement activities to services, like supporting operations and training, or to simple off-the-shelf equipment. For complex procurement projects, EDA is tasked with providing pre-planning and bridging functions for national or intergovernmental procurement organisations like OCCAR and the NSPA.

Interestingly, the LTR also calls for EDA to be the principal forum for member states to decide on appropriate common acquisition options (European Defence Agency, 2024). This is another signal that there is an ongoing shift toward EU institutions as the main coordinators of military development and procurement. However, the operational capacity for this shift remains at large. EDA experienced strained capacity during the Collaborative Procurement of Ammunition project, so it is unlikely that the current capacity will be sufficient to allow for more procurement activities. With the LTR calling on EDA to restrict itself to easier procurement projects, the Council should be aware of the agency's limited capacity. This means that it is likely that the Council will increase EDA's budget and staff to allow it to carry out its increased responsibilities. This would be good for the organisation's public value output, about which the next section will go into detail.

5.2 Empirical Findings for the Dependent Variable

Public Value

The maximisation of interoperability as a public value relies upon increased collaboration between EU member states. Using joint investment, European countries have shown that they can build economies of scale that have the ability to produce large amounts of advanced military matériel. This has particularly been the case with joint European aircraft production, probably because such systems are too expensive to develop alone. Figure 3 shows examples of military aircraft such as the A400m Atlas, the NH90, the Merlin, the Typhoon, the Tornado, etc. Such ventures increase interoperability and reduce financial costs. However, obstacles mentioned in the sections above, with limited commitment from member states for various reasons and a small EDA that has scarce resources, mean that increasing such joint ventures becomes tough to accomplish (Hartley, 2023).

However, the current operational capacity and legitimising environment are sufficient for EDA to create a sizable amount of public value by supporting 94 capability development and research and technology projects. The most added value of the agency comes in the drawing up of requirements and harmonising them across countries. This means that member states, at the very start of a project, have to agree on the basic design parameters of a capability in order to ensure a smooth development and procurement phase. An EDA respondent explained that:

“interoperability becomes a downstream advantage which is only visible over time. Interoperability is thus strengthened indirectly. The EDA has more of an effect on non-material interoperability, such as with the harmonisation of Command and Control procedures.” (interview, May 2024).

If the participating member states agree to common requirements at the start, this is an important improvement for interoperability between the countries as they will be using the same capabilities. It can thus be characterised as a relatively simple but significant step in the achievement of interoperability. Respondents confirm that the steps that have been taken toward more EU defence cooperation in recent years are already impressive. The ‘Collaborative Procurement of Ammunition’ project EDA has been implementing also proves that it has the ability to work on the procurement of weapons in addition to the earlier phases of capability development. EDA would be able to increase its public value output if the whole capability development chain could be overseen by EDA. However, this would require a more permissive legitimising environment with member states really committing to collaborative procurement.

These findings point to a clear dilemma that member states are grappling with. In government, decision-makers are constantly juggling with public values and confronted with dilemmas between those public values. In this case, security, economic welfare and sovereignty are constantly being weighed against each other. The post-Cold War era was characterised by the Peace Dividend, in which defence was outsourced to the US and the economy was prioritised. However, as the era of the Peace Dividend is seemingly coming to an end, a rebalancing of public values is imminent (Cohen & Alderman, 2023). As European governments are slowly but steadily increasing their defence budgets, the choice to spend it collaboratively seems logical (Smith, 2023). For some leaders, this is a hard trade-off as they see their sovereignty as the most important public value, but to spend collaboratively means pooling one's sovereignty. Such leaders would need to see the value of interoperability in collective defence, and choose it as a more important public value than national sovereignty. The recent development that gave EDA extra tasks regarding joint procurement means that member states are slowly taking steps in the direction of more EU coordination (European Defence Agency, 2024). However, it would also require more money and staff to increase EDA's effectiveness. It would also require making decisions on how NATO and OCCAR fit in the joint procurement field.

Figure 3: European collaborative projects (Hartley, 2023)

Project	Type	Start Date	Number of Nations	Total Output
Concorde	Supersonic airliner	1962	2: France/UK	20
Euromissile	Milan; Roland; HOT: Surface to air; anti-tank missiles	1962-64	2: France; West Germany	Milan: 360,000 Roland: 23000 HOT: 70350
Jaguar	Strike aircraft	1965	2: France; UK	543
Anglo-French Helicopter Package	3 types of helicopter	1967	2: France; UK	Gazelle: 1775 Lynx: 450+ Puma: 697
Alpha Jet	Trainer/Light attack aircraft	1969	2: France; WG	480
Tornado	Strike/air defence	1969	3: Germany; Italy; UK	990
Merlin	Helicopter	1981	2: UK; Italy	180+
Typhoon	Strike/air defence	1986	4: Germany; Italy; Spain; UK	571
NH90	Battlefield helicopter	1992	4: France; Germany; Italy; Netherlands	446
Boxer	Armoured vehicle	1993	2: Germany; Netherlands	1062+
Euro Torp	Torpedo	1993	2: France; Italy	NA
Horizon Frigate	Warship	2000	2: France; Italy	4
A400M Atlas	Military transport	2003	7: France; Germany; Spain; UK; Turkey; Belgium; Luxembourg	178
FCAS	Combat aircraft	2018	3: France; Germany; Spain	NA
Tempest	Combat aircraft	2020	4: UK; Italy; Sweden; Japan	NA

i) NA is not available.

ii) Output figures are approximations which can change over time (e.g. additional orders).

iii) FCAS is future combat air system.

5.3 Alignment and Answer to the Research Question

This thesis has investigated the extent to which EU institutions are tailored towards improving interoperability in the armed forces of its member states. The interviewing of Dutch MoD staff and EDA officials, in combination with document studies on the basis of Moore's Strategic Triangle, has resulted in a nuanced image of the EU's ability to achieve this. The legitimising environment is permissive, as member states allow the EU to coordinate defence somewhat, but limited as member states do not fully commit to collaborative spending and hesitate to give EDA more coordination tasks. The operational capacities are also limited as EDA has a small staff and can hardly support any complex projects. Thus, the variables align with one another, showing that the context variable 'legitimising environment' and the independent variable 'operational capacity' are both limited. This results in 'public value', the dependent variable, being limited as well since the limited independent variables constrain EDA's capacity to generate that public value.

However, EDA, as the EU's agency in charge of improving defence cooperation, is still able to generate some public value in terms of interoperability between the armed forces, albeit in an indirect manner. It achieves this by harmonising requirements in the preparatory stages of new capability development and, to a lesser extent, supporting joint development projects in later stages. This is achieved because of a somewhat permissive legitimising environment and operational capacities that allow the organisation to fulfil this task. However, a legitimising environment in which member states would be more committed to defence collaboration would see increased operational capacities flow to EDA, enabling it to generate increased public value as the entire capability development chain could be overseen by the agency. This thus confirms the following hypothesis:

H1: The EU has the ability to improve interoperability, but only if a shift towards EU institutions as coordinating bodies is supported by the member states.

There are signals that this shift is occurring with the 2022 Strategic Compass and the 2024 LTR focusing more and more on EU defence collaboration, but low collaborative spending on procurement remains an issue, and joint procurement remains fragmented as national procurement agencies, OCCAR, the NSPA and EDA manage collaborative projects. This is not necessarily a problem if the agencies cooperate well, but it further complicates an already complex collaborative procurement puzzle.

6. Reflection and Recommendations

This chapter will reflect on the implications of this research for society and the academic community. The reflection will also consider the methods and Moore's conceptual framework used for this study. Furthermore, the main limitations of this study will be explained. The recommendations that are laid out in the third section are important for policymakers. Finally, It will consider what research will need to be done to gain a better understanding of the dynamics in this field.

6.1 Reflection on the answer to the RQ within the societal context

EDA's current ability to provide public value in terms of interoperability is constrained, and the effectiveness of the organisation could be increased. The fact that member states would need to support a shift to the EU as coordinating bodies in order to increase their effectiveness means that European society would need to prepare for more pooling of sovereignty. Defence cooperation comes with the inherent consequence that national authorities give up some control to other countries and allow intergovernmental bodies to support them in the process. This is the cost societies must bear if they strive for a greater common goal of collective defence. If the member states truly want to achieve this, as they have communicated in the 2022 Strategic Compass, they would need to pool sovereignty and funds. National leaders must also consider how they can explain this trade-off to their constituents, as not all citizens favour the idea of giving control and money to the EU.

6.2 Reflection on the result in relation to the methodology and conceptual framework

The result of this study is based on a qualitative single-case methodology that was chosen because it allows for in-depth research of documents and interviews with experts. The document study has been useful in gaining a good baseline understanding of the joint development and procurement field, which took quite some effort to understand. There are many actors, each with their own function and perspective on defence cooperation. There is a sizeable amount of academic research on the subject, and the war in Ukraine seems to have increased interest in the field. This existing literature provided the foundation of this study, which was complemented by the interviews. The respondents provided the author with an even better understanding of the problems with defence cooperation. They gave indispensable accounts that enabled the study to go more in detail, and they revealed the inner workings of EU defence cooperation that one cannot observe by solely studying documents. The combination of these methods provides a robust academic basis for this study. Furthermore, Moore's Strategic Triangle provided a good framework for this study, as its three points -

legitimising environment, operational capacity, and public value- encapsulate the different aspects of the EU defence cooperation challenge very well.

However, Moore's Strategic Triangle requires some adaptation to provide a better-fitting framework for EU defence cooperation challenges. Firstly, the 'legitimising environment' can be made more specific by focusing on 'member state commitment'. Member state commitment is different in the sense that it measures the actions that are needed to follow through on political rhetoric. This study has found that member states are often committed to an EU policy but do not fully commit to that policy in their actions. Secondly, the 'operational capacity' requires no change as it fits the case well because it allows one to closely analyse what an EU organisation is capable of. Thirdly, the 'public value' is a very general term and can be narrowed down into the 'strategic objective'. A 'strategic objective' is a better-fitting term that describes the achievement of interoperability better than 'public value'. A goal like interoperability is a very specific objective that is somewhat far removed from traditional public values, such as trust, legitimacy, or even service delivery quality. While interoperability can be described as a public value, as was argued in the earlier chapters of this study, a better description would be as a strategic objective that armed forces attempt to attain for the collective defence of the bloc and to achieve the more traditional public value of security. Thus, an EU defence cooperation challenge can be analysed by researching the 'member state commitment' to that cooperation, the 'operational capacity' of the relevant organisation, and the achievability of the 'strategic objective'. This augmentation of Moore's Strategic Triangle can be used in future research regarding the balancing act member states have to perform between national autonomy and international cooperation.

Furthermore, some limitations should be mentioned. In terms of transparency, this form of research is lacking because the transcripts of the interviews cannot be publicised. These transcripts hold interesting details about the nature of defence cooperation and the perspectives of Dutch MoD policymakers and EDA staff, so it is unfortunate that their insights cannot be provided to the academic community. Furthermore, while five respondents are enough to gain different perspectives, interviewing more respondents would have provided a more complete overview of the different perspectives that are no doubt present within organisations. Therefore, this study can be seen as an exploratory study of the factors that underpin successful defence cooperation. More research will be required, involving interviews with respondents from other member states, industries, and organisations like OCCAR and the NSPA, to gain a more complete observation of collaborative defence procurement.

6.3 Policy Recommendations

The document study and interviews have given a good overview of the obstacles that limit the legitimising environment, making it more difficult to implement extra policies. Trust issues between member states will be challenging to overcome, and national interests will continue to play a role that makes EU defence cooperation inherently complex. However, if the member states want to build a collective defence that can deter aggressors like Russia, they will have to increase interoperability between the armies. The joint development and procurement of weapons systems are concrete measures that will positively impact interoperability and collective defence in the long term. They make it easier for armies to train and fight together in order to create unity of effort.

- In order to achieve this, it is first and foremost recommended that collaborative spending on new capabilities be increased. It is crucial for member states to hit the stated target of 35% collaborative spending in order to ensure that member states defragment the European defence industry, reduce the amount of different weapons systems in European armed forces, and create economies of scale so that industries can make large amounts that will ultimately reduce costs (interview R3, 2024). Respondents also pointed out that it does not necessarily matter whether the collaborative spending is done with or without EU involvement as long as joint projects are occurring. Respondent 3 explained this well: “For the EDA, the goal is to develop arms collaboratively, regardless of the format. So it does not matter whether this happens bilaterally, with the EU, with OCCAR or the NSPA, as long as it is more collaborative” (interview, May 2024). In addition, member states are encouraged not to come up with their own distinct requirements for new systems because that will complicate production, increase costs and time, and finally create a less reliable product (interview R4 & R5, 2024).
- It is also recommended that EDA’s involvement in harmonising capability requirements be increased. The harmonisation of requirements is essential for joint development and procurement since it is the first and foundational step in procuring a new system. EDA has already accrued the necessary experience with the coordination of this process (interview R4 & R5, 2024). Member states should thus use EDA’s proficiency in requirement harmonisation to a greater extent in more projects.
- In order to effectively carry out its increased responsibilities laid out in the 2024 LTR, EDA’s operational capacity should be significantly increased. The interoperability

challenge is huge, and the development and procurement of new capabilities are complex. The agency's operational budget should thus be significantly increased to allow the hiring of more personnel.

- EDA should also be tasked with actively pitching cooperation opportunities to member states to make them more aware of the potential joint development and procurement options available. This measure would ensure that the opportunities laid out by CARD are actually used by member states (interview R4 & R5). Member states would naturally reserve the right to decide whether they want to partake in particular projects.

6.4 Recommendations for future research

Further research is recommended to go more in-depth into how non-Dutch member states view the defence cooperation challenge. More research could also be conducted into the field of armament organisations to map the relations between national procurement agencies, OCCAR, the NSPA, and EDA. These relationships are currently opaque, and it is hard to get a good view of how these organisations view and work with each other. Furthermore, research into how joint procurement can be made less complex would be very useful as there is a need to simplify procurement processes. This could be achieved by interviewing officials from other member states and organisations like OCCAR, the NSPA, and involved industry agglomerations. It is also necessary for the academic community to gain a further understanding of what it means to shift more defence tasks to the European Union. As member states seek a balance between national interests and European strategic autonomy, insights into the inevitable trade-offs would need to be explored, which could be done using the augmented Strategic Triangle elaborated upon in section 5.2.

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8. Appendix

Interview Protocol

Introduction

- Thank you for taking the time to be interviewed
- The interview will be recorded, but your identity will remain anonymous
 - o *Or if the interview is not allowed to be recorded:*
 - Your answers will be noted down, and your identity will remain anonymous
- The answers will solely be used for academic purposes
- Introduce the thesis subject and the nature of the interview questions
- Do you have any questions before we start?

Questions

- 1) What does your position at EDA/MoD entail?
- 2) How big is the capacity within EDA to coordinate collaborative procurement via PESCO or the European Defence Fund?
 - a. In terms of finances, personnel, efficiency and effectiveness,
 - b. And regarding the number and complexity of the managed projects.
- 3) How much effect does collaborative procurement via the EDA have on interoperability?
 - a. Compared to procurement without EU support.
- 4) Regarding procurement, do you think it is a high priority for member states to procure via EDA?
 - a. instead of procuring bi- or trilaterally or alone without EU institutions?
 - b. Or instead of via the NSPA and OCCAR.
 - i. Is there a clear division of labour between the organisations?

- ii. Is the relationship between the organisations more cooperative or competitive?
- 5) *Only asked to Dutch MoD respondents:* How high is the priority for the MoD to participate in the EDF or PESCO?
- 6) How high is the political support from member states to increase collaborative procurement via EDA?
- a. Is there support for increasing EDA's capacity?
 - b. Are there enough incentives to participate in collaboration?
- 7) How well do you think the defence industry cooperates with EU member states and EDA?
- a. How fragmented is the European defence industry?
 - b. How do national industrial interests influence participation in PESCO?
- 8) What needs to change at the EU level to improve PESCO and the EDF and to increase participation in those projects?
- a. What are the main obstructions keeping countries from procuring via the EU?
 - b. Do you think the EU will become the primary coordinator for defence procurement?